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TW Column by Emily Toth

Say Something Funny—but Don't Ask Dorothy Parker



It's vexing enough when you're strolling down the street, minding your own business, and thinking up the world's most exquisite villanelle—and some bozo barks at you, "Smile!"

Or some fellow traveler on the great walk of life stops to give you unsolicited advice: "You'd look so much better if you had straight hair."

Or there was the time a drag queen at a street fair came at me with a roar: "Get rid of that visible panty line!" (She needed to have her colors done. Orange wasn't working for her.)

But suppose you were a celebrity writer, like my idol Dorothy Parker, and every day some stranger yelled at you, "Say
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something funny!”

That may not happen to you often, unless you're a stand-up comedian. According to their memoirs, they're forever getting accosted at inopportune times. The late great “Mrs. Parker” (1893–1967) used to dread meeting the public. Knowing she was the wittiest woman in New York, fans would accost her in bathrooms, in stores, at the theater and demand that she “say something funny.”

Yes, women writers do attract stalkers. Margaret Mitchell's fans would follow her into dressing rooms, then throw open the curtain and shriek, “Look! She's so petite!” Louisa May Alcott's admirers tried to claw and kiss her. Jane Addams's fans fought to caress her foot.

Those writers were all publicly sweet, though, and Dorothy Parker was not. Especially in her later years, when she was mostly drunk, she might come up with bons mots if someone demanded them—but her bits were snarky rather than what you might call witty. To be funny, she mostly had to write it down first. She had to rehearse it.

(You may think that outspoken, earthy women nowadays are spontaneous. But Samantha Bee began her *Full Frontal* show with nine full-time writers.)

When people expect you to be sparkingly witty all your life, that's no joke. Women's humor is a curious thing. Is it funnier or less funny when a woman “works blue” (talks dirty) on stage? And are there jokes that are funny only in one gender?

I'm thinking about trio jokes such as “a priest, a minister, and a rabbi walk into a bar.” Can there be a trio joke featuring women? Consider “a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead walk into a bar” or—here's a challenge—“a streetwalker, a call girl, and a trophy wife walk into a bar.”

As a teacher—the high-tuition equivalent of a stand-up comedian—I've certainly bombed in front of a live audience. I've gone home and worked on my timing, just as Dorothy Parker did, so I could seem spontaneous. Restless, bored teenagers can be one of the worst audiences ever. And some really have peculiar senses of humor. (Drunk frat boy aliens?)

I wonder: How many girls have had enough self-confidence to be the class clown? I don't know any, but maybe Dorothy Parker was one, in her upper-crusty Catholic prep school circa 1905. She did claim later that she'd been kicked out for mixing up “immaculate conception” with “spontaneous combustion.” But that was long after the fact. She'd had time to hone the material.

We don't have many role models of women who've trusted their sense of humor and killed (as stand-up comedians say). In 1850, for instance, Frances Berry Whitcher was a minister's wife in upstate New York who semi-secretly satirized her neighbors under the title “the Widow Bedott.” Once she was unmasked, she and her husband were driven out of town.

She did get the last word: “It is a very serious thing to be a funny woman.”

There are, of course, those who say that women can't be funny. The late Christopher Hitchens alleged that in his 2007 *Vanity Fair* article “Why Women Aren't Funny,” claiming that Dorothy Parker was never funny. Four years later, he was dead.

Women can't—or mostly won't—be funny in the ways men are. “Say something funny” demands a one-line response, a rat-tat-tat aggressive thrust. Women are more apt to tell drawn-out stories, with caresses and tweaks, rather than spurting a quick judgment or putdown. Maybe we prefer to nurture the story, mother it along until it finds its time.

Joan Rivers, the breakthrough female comedian in our time, was more in the male vein in that her targets were women, especially Elizabeth Taylor and her weight. Phyllis Diller broke into comedy by being self-flagellating, putting down her wild electric hair and her inept husband “Fang.”

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Rivers and Diller did what it took to make it, in a world of male decision makers who preferred women to be catty and under-competent. They did what sold, and I suppose they could be funny on the spot in their own ways.



Dorothy Parker was sometimes in their mold, with her most famous one-liners uttered at the Algonquin Round Table, such as, "See that woman? She speaks eighteen languages and can't say 'no' in any of them." Her ability to make catty wisecracks made her famous, but her wisest writing is in her short stories, full of keen observations about the bittersweet dynamics between women and men.

In our day, Lily Tomlin and then Ellen DeGeneres broke out of the catty one-liners and self-loathing. Tomlin's wife and co-writer, Jane Wagner, has always shared her vision, and Ellen DeGeneres gets strength and ideas from her wife and other women in her life.

They've pioneered humane humor—making fun of the choices people make, but never attacking things that can't be changed, such as faces or body types. One of Lily Tomlin's earliest and finest creations is Crystal the Paraplegic, who's in a wheelchair but can't imagine being sentimental or self-pitying. When a child at an amusement park asks, "Are you a ride?," Crystal says, "I'm the best ride here."

Still, no matter how clever a funny woman thinks she is, there's always someone who thinks she's a bitch. I used to believe there was some commonality to humor, even if I couldn't explain why something was funny; I just knew it when I heard it. Then I read "the funniest joke in the world," chosen in 2002 by the LaughLab, the American offshoot of a British Association for the Advancement of Science project. The self-appointed researchers combed the world for jokes and found their anointed winner in New Jersey. I had a naïve faith it would be a rib tickler, if not a thigh slapper. Here it is:

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other man pulls out his cell phone and calls emergency services. He gasps to the operator, "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator in a calm, soothing voice replies, "Take it easy. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard.

Back on the phone, the hunter says, "Okay, now what?"

I think the joke is deeply stupid, but some people laugh their heads off when you tell it to them. Are they sick, or am I a humorless bitch?

And that makes me think of the ancient Greek philosopher Chrysippus. One day in the third century B.C., it's said he played a prank on a donkey, laughed himself sick at his own wit—and died. I really don't know if that's tragic or hilarious.

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Publishing Information

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- *Louisa May Alcott: A Personal Biography* by Susan Cheever (Simon & Schuster, 2010).
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- "[Here's the Writing Staff of 'Full Frontal with Samantha Bee'](#) [5]" by Megh Wright, *Splitsider*, January 26, 2016.
- Quote from Frances Berry Whitcher and other female comics: "A Laughter of Their Own: Women's Humor in the United States" by Emily Toth in *Critical Essays on American Humor*, edited by William Bedford Clark and W. Craig Turner (G. K. Hall, 1984).
- "[Why Women Aren't Funny](#) [6]" by Christopher Hitchens, *Vanity Fair*, January 2007.
- "[Introduction](#) [7]" for the LaughLab.

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Emily Toth is a regular columnist for *Talking Writing*. Her eleven published books include biographies (Kate Chopin and Grace Metalious), academic advice books (Ms. Mentor), and one historical novel (*Daughters of New Orleans*). She writes the "Ms. Mentor" online advice column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and is writing a novel about an indescribably vicious academic book club. She teaches at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

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